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AUTHOR Cabraal, Liyana M. C.
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ABSTRACT

Built on preliminary findings emerging from an ongoing research project, this paper examines student grouping practices from an institutional-theory perspective. The study, based on interviews with 10 teachers, examines how teachers explain their reasons for grouping students and how they account for their grouping actions. The majority base their grouping actions on some consideration of student ability. Teachers adopt a fluid, flexible approach that balances individual and collective dimensions while attempting to create a small structure to accommodate instructional contingencies within the broader classroom structure. Teachers group to reduce uncertainty and enjoy a sense of autonomy within the small-group structure. Teachers' organizational grouping arrangements may be an attempt to translate differences in intellectual ability into a familiar version (or categorization) of diversity. Teaching to the middle grade level remains a high priority. While converting a complex instructional system into a manageable system, teachers are constantly worried about unintended effects of separating students. Findings suggest that teachers employ grouping as a flexible organizational mechanism for instruction. Grouping creates institutionally defined structures to organize activities related to the instructional program. There should be a judicious match between structure and broadly defined ability. (Contains 37 references.) (MLH)

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Grouping in Classrooms as an Institutionally Constructed System Of Actions

Liyana M. C. Cabraal

College of Education

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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Grouping in Classrooms as an Institutionally Constructed System Of Actions

Introduction:

This paper examines student grouping practices from the perspective of institutional theory. The study explores the extent to which teachers' actions of grouping in elementary classrooms is institutionally constructed. Institutional theory and related conceptions of social action suggest that what occurs in organizations can be conceptualized as structural embodiments of the institutions of those organizations (e.g. DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; DiMaggio, 1988; Selznick, 1949, 1957; Garfinkel, 1967; Berger & Luckman, 1966; Parsons, 1937; Schutz, 1932/1967; Weber, 1947). Similarly, in the field of education institutional theory argues that the meanings of the actions of educators within the school are rooted in the broader environment of the institution of education (Meyer, 1994a, 1987, 1986, 1977; Meyer, Boli, & Thomas, 1987; Boli & Ramirez, 1986; Meyer, Scott, & Deal, 1981; Meyer & Rowan, 1978, 1977).

Education is a highly developed institution in modern society (Eisenstadt, 1968; Illich, 1970; Meyer,1977; Meyer, Scott, & Deal, 1981). Schools are individual organizations built within the institutional structure of education. Institutional theory defines the institutional structure of education as a system of meanings, ideologies, rules, and values which is being constantly evolved in a broad cultural system. Institutional theory argues that the institutional structure of education provides the necessary frame of reference and the meaning structure for what teachers and principals do in executing the educational process. Any interpretation of the actions of teachers and principals, therefore, becomes meaningful only when those interpretations are examined within the broader framework of the institutional structure of education. That is to say that the actions of the people in organizations reflect supra organizational patterns which become understandable only in the broader context of institutional structure (Friedland & Alford,

1991).

With the steady developments in non behaviorist thinking, the study of organizational process and social action is gradually being transformed. Various actions people take in organizations, their practical consciousness, and the related meanings of these actions have become the center of concerns in organizations. According to the new thinking on the subject, institutions are a product of human action, but not necessarily of purposive human action. Institutional thinking focuses on how actors' expectations are conveyed around both implicit and explicit principles, decision making procedures, rules and norms (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Rules, individuals' knowledge, and other resources built around action are essential parts of the institutional structure. As institutional elements, these factors create and recreate action. This suggests that day to day actions of educators are embodied in a broader system of meanings of action which is the institutional structure of education. This thinking represents a critical shift in organizational theory from the previous thinking which conceptualizes individual actions as based on utilitarianism and behaviorism. This paper examines the extent to which teachers' actions of student grouping can be interpreted through the framework of institutional theory.

Previous Explanations on Grouping Related to Institutional Thinking:

The complex system of formal educational action in school was initially characterized by grade structure. It became more complex as multiple classrooms were formed within different grade levels. The classroom organization was made more complex with the addition of ability groups (Rosenbaum, 1980). These structural developments can be seen as a part of a common organizational response to diverse educational needs in school. The common organizational response, in this case, is the differentiation of the body of organization into subunits as a rational efficient arrangement between organizational components (i.e. people, technology, resources, and

different contexts). This efficiency driven principle has been used to legitimate grouping practices in schools (Gamoran; Nystrand; Berends; & LePore, 1995, Gamoran, 1986; Rosenbaum, 1980; Sorensen, 1970). Consequently, "most schools sort students into groups, either within classrooms or in separate classrooms, whether based on teachers' judgments about students' aptitudes or on some kind of measurement of ability" (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthey, 1996, p.3). Grouping has become a widely used organizational form in the elementary school instructional program (Slavin, 1987; Pallas, Entwisle, Alexander, & Stulka, 1994). The graded schooling arrangement under which all these specific structural features have developed in schools is basically linked with the age stratification of the society which is a fundamental social feature of the life course of all individuals (Angus, Mirel, & Vinovskis, 1988).

The literature on the institutional effects of ability grouping is related to institutional thinking to a certain extent. Generally this literature explains how classroom grouping reflects the symbolic, categorization, and classification, functions of the institution of education. In this regard Pallas et al (1994) argue,

> "group placements symbolize certain shared understandings of the qualities and capacities of group members, independent of the actual skills these group members have, and thus influence the perceptions and expectations of other members of a society, including parents and teachers" (p.27).

Gamoran (1984) argues that "ability groups are not merely organizational units within an isolated classroom, but correspond to a set of socially defined categories" (p.5). Citing Meyer (1980) he further argues that "a reading group may also be seen as an educational category in a socially defined, institutionalized context that transcends individual classrooms" (Gamoran, 1984, p.5). Pallas et al also(1994) argue that when ability groups are conceptualized as institutionalized categories it is meant that groups carry a symbolic significance. They are loaded with meanings of two symbolic functions. One is that high ability groups function as a mechanism of motivating the students of

those groups for greater learning since they develop in them high anticipation levels of their future by being the members of those groups. The other symbolic function is the quite opposite of this: Lower ability groups constrain students' future achievement by limiting their anticipation level. Gamoran argues that "this anticipation need not be a conscious process, but may be absorbed from environmental cues" (Gamoran, 1984, p.16).

Generally the studies on the effects of ability grouping have reported that group differences in instruction, norms, and expectations were highly related to the differences in student outcomes (Pallas, et al 1994). This proposition is built on a positive relationship between group status and student outcomes. Dreeban and Barr (1988) studied the relationship between content, pacing, and quantity of instruction and the composition and the allocation of instructional resources in the classroom and how the groups vary over those related areas. Dreeben and Barr (1988) also focused on the effects of classroom composition on academic achievement. They found that organization of instruction within classroom indicates how people, resources, and educational opportunities are matched along the institutional rules in various specific environmental settings.

Pallas et al (1994) point out that the research on the institutional effects of ability grouping by Gamoran (1984, 1986) and Dreeban & Barr (1988) does not reflect a broader view on social or institutional effects. In considering Gamoran's (1986) study, Pallas et al argue that he

> "viewed institutional effects as a theory of motivation and anticipatory socialization, arguing that the symbolic nature of reading groups and the groups' ability to grant access to desired future statuses influence students' motivation and levels of aspiration and, hence, how much they learn. In this sense, reading-group placements have a direct socializing influence on students that is independent of socialization effects arising from the internal social properties of ability groups

(social comparisons, normative processes, and reference-group influences). But this characterization of institutional effects is a socialization theory based on the aggregated motivations of individuals, a view that is largely rejected by the new institutionalists" (p.30).

As they point out, instructional and social interpretations of grouping effects are comparative and normative. The central underlying argument of such interpretations is that placement of individuals in groups generates a process of socialization. This process occurs by exposing children to different levels of curriculum and also by developing in them different norms of academic performance. Most of the research on grouping and its institutional effects are based on such socialization conceptualizations.

However, Gamoran (1984) also takes another position regarding the institutional effects of ability grouping which is more satisfying than his first position on the subject (Pallas et al, 1994). He sees institutional effects of ability grouping when placements of students in higher and lower ability groups in subsequent levels are made on the basis of their current placements irrespective of their performance. "Teachers may be guided by the symbolic value of students' first grade positions when deciding where to place students for second grade reading instruction: high reading group first graders may be seen as belonging in high second grade groups, and so on" (p.127). Pallas et al (1994) see this argument is also consistent with Sorensen's (1984) argument on the subject. Sorenson (1984) argues that assignments of students to various groups function as signals which convey information about students' capacities and these signals provide the basis for future assignments; they also affect the students' attitudes and aspirations and parents' knowledge about the potential of their children. She sees this as the "signaling function of organizational differentiation" (Sorensen, 1984, p. 39). Symbolic messages are also provided in relation to defining differentiation into stratified groups as legitimate and global (Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1984 b). Confirming the findings by Gamoran (1984), Pallas et al (1994) found that the children placed in high ability reading groups are

considered by teachers and parents as high performers irrespective of their actual performance. Pallas et al (1994) argue that

> "the most important prediction of an institutional (p.30) view of ability-group effects is not that individuals actually learn more - a socializing effect of group placement - but, rather, that they are *treated* as having learned more by parents, teachers, peers, and the society at large. In this view, evaluations of the skills and values of individuals are by-products of the symbolic meaning of ability groups" (p.31).

They see the second approach as an important one for studying ability grouping and its institutional effects in early elementary grades. This paper attempts to extend the current thinking on the subject from both these positions. It examines the institutional construction of action in the area of grouping in classrooms by focusing more on the practical reasoning of teachers. It's more concerned about the dynamics of action.

The Methodology of the Present Study:

This paper is built on some preliminary findings emerging from an on going research project which attempts to use institutional theory to explain the meanings of teachers' actions of grouping students in their classrooms. The study examines how teachers explain their reasons for grouping students and how they account for what they do in the process of grouping. These explanations are interpreted using the institutional theory and the related conceptions of social action. This paper focuses on exploring the extent to which grouping in classrooms can be explained as institutionally constructed. The study examines how teachers decide upon appropriate courses of action with respect to grouping students for instruction; that is how they construct means-end relationships.

This preliminary study is based on interviews conducted with ten elementary school teachers regarding their classroom grouping practices. The paper discusses several themes that have emerged from this pilot study and examines these themes in light of

institutional theory. The grade levels taught by the teachers in the sample range from First grade to Fifth grade. The experience of the teachers range from 2 - 31 years. The teachers were selected from five different elementary schools in two school districts in Illinois.

Emerging Themes Regarding Teachers' Actions of Grouping.

Ability as an institutional focus in grouping: Majority of teachers interviewed base their actions of grouping on some considerations of students' ability. But ability is not the sole criterion for making this decision. Rather, what the teachers' explanations reveal is that, most of the times, they consider students' ability in conjunction with their own particular instructional needs which are, of course, differentially defined and perceived by teachers. For example the majority of teachers group children in reading more frequently than for other subjects. Mathematics is the next subject most frequently organized by ability groups. The teachers in the sample were less concerned about grouping students by ability in other subjects like social studies and science. When they do group students in these subjects it's mainly for project work, rather than regular tasks in the classroom.

The interviews with teachers also reveal that in some cases, activities are done in such a way that children are not exposed to an explicit structure of ability levels. The majority of teachers in the sample felt that the children should not know what level they are working at. That is, the teachers expressed the belief that any classroom structure based on ability should be hidden from the students. Despite their feelings that it is important to conceal ability structures from the students, the majority of teachers conceded that most students are aware of their relative positions within the organization of the classroom. Teachers are in a dilemma in this respect. They feel a need to create ability groups to reduce the complexity of instruction in order to make learning comfortable for students. At the same time they feel that the differing statuses attached to

these groups should be hidden from the students themselves.

This situation reveals two dimensions of educational action. One is the orientation of action toward minimizing complexity in learning. The other is creating a deceptive scenario of action of which realities are kept away from the easy perception of the direct beneficiaries of these educational actions, the students. But it is not a question about 'good' and 'bad' structures. Institutionally the construct of ability has developed in education as a central theme.

Adopting a fluid, rather than a Fixed approach to Grouping: Most of the times there is some sort of differentiation between low and high ability levels. But the actions of grouping are generally characterized by teachers' attempts to keep the numbers of groups to a minimum. Some teachers argued that everything should be 'kept at students' ability'. But this does not mean a separation of ability levels from each other. One of the teachers argued:

> ".....they are going to change and I am going to change. As a good teacher you have to change what you are doing. And you have to keep it exiting, you have to keep it fresh, you have to keep it new, and yet you have to keep it at their ability.....You might have very very simple kind of text for your lower kids. And get them started on the road to reading.....basic, beginning. Well, to bring in a kid that's reading on a third grade level and read that stuff is malpractice. She doesn't need that"

Ability is a central theme in understanding the institutional construction of actions related to grouping. According to a number of researches, students' intellectual ability is socially constructed (Simpson, 1975; Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1984 A). Simpson's (1975) argument is that the form which gives meaning to the concept of ability is the students' cognitive structure built around the conceptions of ability. He theorized that the concept of ability as it is institutionalized in U.S society is mirrored in unidimensional

classrooms. Unidimensional classrooms are viewed as the "classrooms that narrowly define academic ability - increase the amount of stratification within them" (Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1984 b) and also as the "classrooms characterized by low dimensionality and high visibility of performance, may produce singular performance information by eliminating alternative notions of ability" (Rosenholtz & Rosenholtz, 1981, p.134). Stratification, in this case is "the hierarchical arrangement of students into groups according to status as determined by perceived ability" (Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1984 B, p.21). Rosenholtz & Simpson (1984 a) found that the unidimensional classroom organization is related with how intellectual ability is institutionalized and how students compare and interpret their positions. They also found that only a limited range of abilities and performances are associated with classroom tasks, and that this encourages a single dimension of comparison. These findings show that interaction between the structure and the student characteristic of ability creates an institutional script round the actions of the classroom. This script is characterized by a fluid system of on going actions of classroom organization. It is not only ability teachers are concerned about when they group. As this study reveals, they are also concerned about, for example, students' interests, instructional demands of the lessons, project needs, how students get along with others, students' rate of progress, and their potential. These concerns constantly change the classroom organization.

Adopting a flexible approach with a balance between individual and collective dimensions: This study reveals that teachers take actions of grouping to create a small structure of their own design and which makes room for accommodating instructional contingencies within broader classroom structure they have been given. They see small groups as the most conducive organizational structure for learning in most of the learning situations although they situate their actions within the larger system of actions in school. In doing this they strive to create a balance between the individual and collective

dimensions of the classroom. Some teachers constantly attempt to concentrate services within the same classroom by attracting more resources from other places in the school and making an effective match between resources and the structure. Some teachers group children within the classroom in such a way that they are in a position to make the best use of special education teachers and Title I teachers in the school. Other teachers practice grouping as a very frequently changing organization model and they adopt grouping patterns that reflect the emerging needs of every school day. As some of the teachers' arguments suggest, grouping has to be redefined constantly in relation to the other parts of the structure students are moving into. None of the teachers conceptualized ability groups as long term structural shelters within which all instructional activities of a subject should be organized. For example, one teacher explained:

> " I do some homogeneous grouping by ability. Basically I am not a big believer in it. I am more a believer in that kids learn lots of different kinds of ways. And I look at grouping while I look at other things in education. It sometimes takes one, two, three, four different ways for kids to learn one thing..... So, I think that, sometimes, it's OK to ability group.....The other day I put all my highest math's students together, five of six of them and I taught them in a small group.....

But as the instruction demands he constantly changes his organization pattern. He said:

> ".....Today for example I had seven different things going on for math centers. The kids got to choose where they wanted to go, and then we had seven groups of three. And I had my lowest math student with a middle with a high. They got grouped themselves which worked out fine. They all learnt different things, at their level....."

This flexibility is also reflected in the teachers' shifting back and forth between small group teaching and whole group teaching. Almost every teacher interviewed used both organizational patterns.

> Two teachers out of ten in the study group students randomly. They move

students between groups as the need arises. By that process they create a feasible and under- control work environment. One teacher breaks the whole group into small groups even before she meets them at the beginning of the year. She does it by looking at the list of names. As she points out, she does not know whether students are high or low, or whether they are average in their ability. The second teacher observed that she does not do ability grouping at all. When she makes seating arrangements she keeps in mind students' behavior, their ability, and their sex. Every month seating arrangements based groups are changed. These changes are common for any subject. At the beginning of the year, she lets the class sit as four groups. She just randomly lets them sit as four groups. But after a week, when she gets some knowledge of students she starts switching as the instructional needs arise. At least monthly their seating arrangements are changed. These two teachers are not completely different from the other teachers who do grouping based on, to some degree, students' ability. As their explanations suggest both categories of teachers, when it comes to an instructional need, take action which agrees with students' ability. Most teachers are institutionally disciplined to rise to the occasion and make intellectually sound decisions. One teacher with thirty one years of experience in elementary teaching always group children according to their ability. After the very first week of the year she groups the students based on their ability. But her instructional program is comprehensive enough to accommodate different categories of students. The institutional reality is the actions of teachers are, most of the times, complex. It can contain a variety of patterns of action oriented toward multiple directions.

Grouping to reduce uncertainty: Building up a small group structure within the given structure can be conceptualized as an attempt to make the process of educational action certain and predictable to a certain degree and to create some safe-guards for day to day educational actions, especially, the actions regarding the instructional core. Reducing uncertainty is coupled with progress. The study reveals that the nature of the concern for

students' progress is perceived and defined in relation to the attempts teachers make to reduce uncertainty in the classroom. Teachers generate actions to create progress in different ways within the structure. These efforts are oriented toward growth and improvement. The process of grouping is also based on a optimistic conviction of the relationship between the present action and the future. Teachers always design the means for progress by structuring the present situation. The most common attempt in this regard is grouping.

A sense of autonomy attached to actions of grouping: Teachers enjoy a sense of autonomy and to some degree a sense of choice in their actions within the small group structure. All teachers who participated in the study are of the opinion that they are not bound by any external forces to adopt a particular organizational structure within the classroom. What they observed was that their actions in classroom organization are not constrained by the state or any rigid decisions made by the school. Some teachers get previous teachers' recommendations about how to group students when a new group of students come to their class each year, but they point out that they are not bound by such recommendations. They use their own understanding of the students they develop over the course of their interactions with students. Some of the teachers use formal assessment mechanisms to obtain this initial knowledge of students' abilities. No decision is made depending solely on others' recommendations. Teachers own understanding of the students based on the tests they administer, as well as other assignments and observation are the most important considerations. In deciding how to group students in their classrooms most teachers seek no recommendations at all from previous teachers.

Transforming intellectual ability into a familiar version of diversity: The organizational arrangements teachers make with the actions they take in grouping or not grouping students can be seen as an attempt to translate diversity in intellectual ability into a

definable familiar version of diversity. Almost all the teachers who use ability as a basic criterion to group children, i. e. seven teachers out of ten in the study, develop a familiar version of categorization based on ability. With some teachers, the categorization is between the levels such as high, middle, and low or at risk. To most of the teachers this categorization is grade level, below grade level, and above grade level. The level is relative to the institutionalized standard of each grade level. But the problem is that in some subjects at least four or five students out of about twenty four students are above the grade level. Another group of students are below the grade level. Actual class identity is constructed by the average or the middle group in practice. The responses of the teachers show that, even though they are concerned about the students who are below and above grade levels their activities are generally controlled by the instructional needs of those who are at the middle or at the grade level. This suggests that their actions are legitimated by the institutionally constructed broad structure which assigns the average or the middle level of performance as its standard.

However some of the teachers, in exceptional ways, quite effectively address the needs of the below and the above average students while teaching to the middle. But, probably, they may not be able to do that quite often. This raises a fundamental organizational question in education, i.e. Does the current structure permit the creation of an intellectual environment where human potential and human intervention are constantly redefined and action is taken accordingly? One teacher, in explaining how she uses special education teacher as a major resource for her reading lessons pointed out that the focus of special education teacher's contribution is 'pushing' not 'pulling out'. She referred to this example when she was explaining how they, within the group structure, without pulling out the below average, push them toward the regular classroom standards. Another teacher constantly changes his group structure, sometimes involving some of the grade five students in some of his grade one groups. Again this sounds like an attempt to 'push' toward higher levels.

Conclusion:

The most challenging task before social sciences is to examine complex social situations and make them more understandable. The growing complexity in educational action has created a need to engage in the task of reassessing the potential of school. This task can take different forms. One is to examine different components of the system of educational action as it is structured within the organization of school. This paper attempts to explain the extent to which the system of actions of grouping within elementary classrooms is institutionally constructed. The paper attempts to extend current thinking on the subject by focusing on teachers' practical reasoning behind their actions of grouping. The study turns more toward the emphasis on the dynamics of action in institutional theory.

This paper generates several basic themes regarding some dimensions through which institutional construction of the actions of grouping can be understood in schools. The paper reveals that grouping in elementary classrooms, among other things, functions as a structural mechanism within individual school organizations to convert the complex system of instruction to a manageable system of organizational action as it is defined by the institutional structure of education. This system of action creates boundaries around instruction, especially around the development and utilization of educational resources and the use of methods. It also creates a situation where teachers feel uncomfortable in exposing students to ability structures. Teachers are constantly worried about the unintended effects of dividing the student body of classroom.

The whole process of grouping needs a redefinition of ability, a broad one with clear understanding of its multiple dimensions. The findings of this study suggest that teachers' grouping of students reflects a broadly defined dynamic concept of ability. An institutional interpretation would be that students' ability is a central component of the institution of education and what is needed is a reflection of the vitality and dynamism of ability in the classroom structure. Action should be directed toward a judicious match

between structure and broadly defined ability. Then a system of multiple structural arrangements can evolve within classrooms. This study reveals that teachers employ grouping as a flexible organizational mechanism for instruction. It is not a clear cut fixed system of organization.

The paper also argues that one of the institutionally constructed functions of grouping is to make the process of educational action as certain and predictable as possible and create technical safe-guards around day to day educational actions, especially, the actions within the instructional core. The challenge of uncertainty creates a need for constructing visibility or a sufficient degree of certainty at the institutional level (Meyer,1994 b). The most significant part of this argument is the need for institutional definitions for constructing visibility. This argument creates a sound conceptual context for arguing further that the actors involved in the instructional process are constantly engaged in an unending project of seeking commonalties among various elements of educational action at a deeper level. Only such a project can ensure the continuity of action and provide a long-lasting foundation for growth and development. Grouping in classrooms is also a manifestation of such a project.

Teachers' actions of grouping reflect supra organizational patterns which become understandable only in the context of institutional structure, in the context of deeper meanings those action create. As educational actions in school become embodied in the institutional structure of education, they also become more comprehensible to others and more controllable by others. Grouping creates institutionally defined structures to organize activities related to the instructional program. This organization is done basically by developing familiar structures where diversity is converted into familiar forms within the instructional program. All actions related to grouping such as defining and classifying students, actions, and resources; selecting criteria for grouping; and maintaining different patterns of moving students among groups, contribute toward building structural patterns for classroom activities. The actions of grouping which are

driven by a need for certainty and prediction serve the purposes of classification and categorization of educational action. Teachers' actions are linked to future progress in an ongoing process of accomplishments and attempts of seeking certainty.

Grouping in classrooms is an example of a structure of action in education which shows that understanding such a system requires unraveling the deeper meanings of what teachers are engaged in day to day practice, and how they create systems of actions which are characterized by a conscious pursuit of harmony between the individual and the collectivity. Consistencies and contradictions are a part of the order of such a system. To improve a better organization for instruction the required approach may be one concerned with both those elements and the related complexities.

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